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GERALD POSNER EXPLORES THE ENDURING RIDDLE OF JFK'S DEATH

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BODY:

CASE CLOSED

Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK

By Gerald Posner

Random House; 607 pages; \$ 25

This exhaustive account of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy assassination appears at first to be an honest and painstaking effort to sort through mountains of material and establish, once and for all, who shot JFK and why.

That Gerald Posner, the critically praised author of "Mengele" and "Warlords of Crime," concludes that the Warren Commission, for all its mistakes, was right -- Lee Harvey Oswald killed JFK and acted as a "lone assassin" -- may sound absurd in the face of questions raised by other honest and painstaking accounts.

That Posner's very title, "Case Closed," arrogantly dismisses every other work on the subject may further alienate some readers. But in his 600-plus pages of investigation, including new interviews and studies involving computer enhancements, sonic digitizers and neutron activation, Posner does at times present a convincing argument.

But then, they all do. The problem for readers is which authors to believe about which details. For example, one of the earliest critics of the Warren Commission, Bolinas private detective Josiah Thompson, wrote in "Six Seconds in Dallas" that 52 percent of the witnesses at Dealey Plaza said they heard shots coming from the grassy knoll rather than from the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald allegedly had his "sniper's nest."

Posner accuses Thompson of putting some witnesses in the "grassy knoll" category who "actually," he writes, "described the shots as coming from the vicinity of the Book Depository." So Posner, eminently fairer, quotes other sources showing that only 12 percent of the witnesses "pinpointed the grassy knoll."

In this and hundreds of other cases, he favorably compares his version to others, then dismisses any and all of what he calls "the conspiracy critics,"

ranging from the most recent, Oliver Stone of "JFK" fame, to the earliest,

Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgment," 1967.

But in almost every case, Posner discovers an abyss of complicated details and contradictions. For example, as to the number and direction of shots that killed JFK, the truth is that nobody will ever know because Dealey Plaza constitutes one big echo chamber, as Posner notes, in which witnesses reported "reverberation" of sounds that "bounced off the buildings," especially near the grassy knoll.

But if that key point hardly constitutes a "closed case," Posner is ready with 1992 computer enhancements of Abraham Zapruder's famous home movie to show that Oswald took not 4.8 to 5.6 seconds, as earlier studies suggest, but as many as 8.4 seconds to fire three shots -- more evidence that he was acting alone. Posner also says that rifle experts shooting Mannlicher Carcanos like the one Oswald allegedly used have demonstrated that after Oswald missed the JFK limousine with the first shot, "he had at least 3 seconds to reload, aim and fire the second shot, which hit both Kennedy and (Texas governor John) Connally. He then had another 5 seconds -- ample time -- for the third shot, which killed the President."

Really? What about the "badly misaligned" telescopic gun sight that Jim Garrison mentions in "On the Trail of the Assassins"? Again, it depends on whom you believe. Posner says it's not a "badly misaligned" but a "very slight misalignment" on the scope and that it "may actually have aided him in hitting Kennedy." That's strange -- how could a misalignment help the shooter? Posner doesn't explain. In a footnote, Posner refers us to Warren Commission volumes but doesn't explain, and in this key area of conflict, we need a lot of explanation.

Then there's the "magic bullet" that the movie "JFK" demonstrated had to turn and twist in midair to account for no less than seven entry and exit wounds. Posner says the Zapruder film enhancements now show that Connally was turning his body in such a way that the bullet made a straight path through five of the wounds, "tumbled" rather than twisted and changed direction only after hitting Connally's rib.

Thank you, new technology: With Posner's interpretation, it does help to explain how the "magic bullet" turned into the "pristine" bullet (relatively undamaged); how the notorious "backyard photos" of Oswald holding his rifle may not have been phony; how Oswald's palm print on the rifle might not have been planted by the FBI.

But they don't explain why the driver of the limousine slowed the JFK/Connally car to a stop rather than accelerated after the first shot; why FBI agents deliberately destroyed notes written by Oswald or by themselves about Oswald; why Dallas police never taped or took notes of their interrogation of Oswald (insistence that they didn't have a tape recorder is not a reason); why Dallas Police Department files identifying the "three tramps" (suspects found in the railroad yard near Dealey Plaza) were not found until 1992; or why the military autopsy of JFK's body was indeed one of the "worst and most botched autopsies ever," as one medical examiner put it. (Robert and Jacqueline Kennedy making decisions and hurrying the autopsy along is again not a reason.)

Though Posner's book doesn't really settle very much, it might be worth reading if he hadn't suggested that the whole conspiracy notion is really our fault -- we Americans -- for caring too much that a boob like Oswald murdered our Camelot hero.

"You want to add something weightier to Oswald," Posner quotes William Manchester, author of "Death of a President." "It would invest the President's death with meaning. . . . A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely. Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatever that there was one."

You can't say that by Posner's account, surely. In fact, the only reason "Case Closed" works as a title is that readers may be so sick of JFK assassination books they couldn't possibly stomach another one.

GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH